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SUBJECT: ARAB-APPALACHIAN FUSION MUSIC CONCERTS

¶1. On the first week of March 2006, the U.S. Consulate General in Florence organized three fusion music concerts in Colle Val D'Elsa (Siena), Bologna and Modena, targeting local Muslim communities, high school and university students, authorities and representatives from local community institutions. The group named "kantara", composed of four young American talents and three renowned Tunisian artists, started its first-ever tournee' in Italy in front of large appreciative audiences. Kantara is the name of the enlarged "Le Minaret et La Tour" group, which performed in Florence and Colle Val D'Elsa in November 2005. The past success of this unusual blend of Arabic-Appalachian music convinced the Consulate in Florence to request the Department of State's support for a new performing arts project targeting, principally but not exclusively, the Muslim communities residing in the rest of the consular district.

¶2. The concert in Colle Val D'Elsa had been organized for the second time in light of continuous requests by the local government, eager to repeat the November success and to co-sponsor a cultural initiative favoring integration between the moderate Muslims and the citizens of Colle. The performance took place on March 3, at the S. Agostino Theater, before almost 300 people, mostly young Muslims and high school students, but also local authorities and common citizens from neighboring towns. In the words of the mayor, this event is a step forward to "fight ignorance" and a means "to support the knowledge of different cultures" on the path to "dialogue and integration, based on values like civilization, solidarity and democracy". In his speech Imam Jabareen, who actively contributed to the initiative, reminded the audience that for those who wish a mutual and better understanding through dialogue "no effort is small, no commitment is useless". Finally, the hosting Catholic priest, Father Daniele welcomed the concert as the best evidence that, notwithstanding what the Italian media say, there is no clash of civilizations.

¶3. The concert in Bologna, the first Florence PA event in the city in years, took place in the prestigious Fifteenth Century Farnese Chapel, one of the most sought-after venues for public events, inside the ancient Town Hall. About 200 people attended the concert, presented by CG Dempsey and by the chairperson of the Interdepartmental Center for Islamic Studies of the University of Bologna, who gave welcome remarks in Arabic and Farsi for the members and students of the Islamic community. Among the audience, there were also the director of the conservatory, several academicians, the president of the City Council and representatives of the business and cultural institutions. The chapel was standing room only. Some students who wanted to listen to the concert in spite of the lack of available seats, agreed to sit on the floor. This performance has been a result of an enthusiastic support of the local institutions, namely the Town Hall, the University of Bologna/University of Denver, and the "Luciano Finelli" cultural institution. This cooperation went beyond the Consulate's expectations, and paves the way to future new PD projects.

¶4. The third and final concert was held on March 5 in Modena, at the headquarters of Rossini Chorale, a musical institution of renown in the region, which includes Luciano Pavarotti among its members. Together with CG Dempsey, the performance was introduced by the President of the Chorale and by the mayor of the city. Even in this last concert the room, with 170 seats, was full, with such an enthusiastic audience that the musicians had to play two encores. PA office is already receiving calls from Modena by citizens who did not attend the event but heard about the beauty of the music and are interested in obtaining a recording or CD of the group.

¶5. The performances have been widely covered by local press, which stressed the beauty of the new sound of the Arab-Appalachian music and the message underlying the strength of the intercultural dialogue. The music has been described as "magic, surrounding atmosphere where the Arab and American cultures merge to grow together and explore new, undiscovered paths, at the same time delivering a message of peace" (il Resto del Carlino - Bologna). Headlines: "American and Islamic beauty in concert" (Il Corriere di Siena); "Fusion Music brings together United States and Islam" (Il Cittadino Ogg); "Success of the Kantara Group: the musicians who build the dialogue between the United States and Islam" (Metropoly Day); "An event to support dialogue among peoples through the music" (Sienanews.it); "Two cultures, one music" (Il Resto del Carlino - Bologna). Other articles appeared on La Nazione, L'Unita'-

Firenze, Valdelsa.net, Il Resto del Carlino - Modena, and Gazzetta di Modena.

16. The Florence Consulate effectively reached out to not only the local Muslim communities throughout the district, but also to Italian citizens and local cultural and political institutions. Best of all, the initiative appears to have raised awareness among the citizens and authorities of the three cities of the need to explore new ways to approach a dialogue with the Islamic community as well as to get to know the Islamic culture. The consulate staff has been impressed by the number of request for CDs and enquiries about the possibility to repeat the performances in the future.

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